

CONFIDENTIAL

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Dear Sir:

THE C.I.A. IN ASIA (I): When United States Central Intelligence Agency Director RICHARD HELMS was getting ready to visit Saigon last fall for talks with South Vietnamese President NGUYEN VAN THIEU, he sent ahead an unusual calling card.

It was in the form of a news leak to the New York Times.

A story quoting "government officials" related in considerable detail the C.I.A. finding that there were some 30,000 agents of the Vietcong that had insinuated themselves into the Saigon government apparatus.

The findings revealed Hanoi intentions to increase that number to 60,000 by the end of 1971.

The conclusion was that the Saigon government would not be able to cope with these agents in shaping the country's future.

The information had very little to do with fact.

The figures came out of a hat---Richard Helms' hat.

The story was, frankly, designed to scare the hell out of President Thieu and make Helms' bargaining position a little easier.

What Helms was selling was the C.I.A. line of a need for a tougher security stance internally. Basically, President RICHARD NIXON had asked Helms if there was something he could do about the rampant corruption inside the Thieu government---officers squandering aid funds on luxury cars, wine and women and allowing an unacceptable amount of Uncle Sam's cash to turn up as flight capital to Swiss and French banks.

It was one of the rare (but increasing) instances when Helms and the C.I.A.---generally close-mouthed adherents to the "no comment" school---had ever used the press for leverage.

But it tells a lot about the C.I.A., which often feels frustrated about "not getting its message across" to the people it wants to reach in and out of the administration.

For the last few months, for example, the C.I.A. has been peddling in Washington and elsewhere details of an intensified Communist Chinese road-building effort in northern Laos.

But correspondents involved with Peking ping-pong and other developments have found the story not glamorous enough, nor different enough, from earlier ones on the same subject to get much space.

Helms visited Laos, which has come to be known as "C.I.A. Country", after twisting Thieu's arm and then went on to Tokyo to discuss Red China's nuclear, rocket and submarine developments with officials of Japan's intelligence-defense establishment.

These events were not reported in your daily newspaper and the exact details will never be known.

The C.I.A. is a many tentacled thing.

It operates in many diverse ways.

Most of its operations, by percentage are overt but scantily publicized. The rest is covert and a very small percentage of the operations could be described, as one agent put it, as "downright dirty tricks".

C.I.A. operations are brilliant and blundering, dynamic and dull. The organization is made up of people and thus subject to human-type triumphs and shortcomings.

It is a far cry from pulp novel tales of Superspy or Dr. No or SOMERSET MAUGHAM's famed agent ASHENDEN.

Activities range from culling through vernacular newspapers to build up dossiers on the friendship circles of leaders and prospective leaders (a major overt activity in Asia) to recording mah-jong table gossip in Djakarta, to paying off a physician in Singapore or Surabaya for information on the health of national leaders.

C.I.A. agents are well-trained. Even the ones involved in the most elementary tasks have made at least one parachute jump and have had to go through chores like establishing a bank account in Arlington, Virginia, under an assumed name, or figuring out how to lift documents from a locked filing cabinet.

The C.I.A., unknown to most Americans or anyone else, works in close cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and on this score may trample on U.S. constitutionality at times.

This link is used to keep up-to-the-minute dossiers---using code names for the persons instead of their real names---on Americans living abroad as well as foreign nationals.

American newsmen and businessmen, especially, are closely scrutinized when their lives seem to brush circumstances in which the C.I.A. is interested.

The joke around Washington D.C. was that the C.I.A. was so ill-prepared for the Communist Chinese ping-pong invitation that it held around-the-clock cram courses on table tennis and offered \$100,000 in prizes for any employees who could play the game with enough proficiency to make the U.S. team.

It's good humor, but bad intelligence.

Although they've been caught napping on many other developments, the C.I.A. had the ping-pong caper cold.

But...as you might imagine...White House intelligence coordinators thought someone over at C.I.A. had gone goofy when a report was submitted weeks ago anticipating the table tennis invitation.

The C.I.A. took the jabs quietly and then arranged to curb one of its own operations that might have upset the "warm friendliness" of Peking's table tennis overture:

Helms personally composed the message that was beamed to Vientiane, Laos, in code for the C.I.A. there to cease "until further notice" its sending of armed Laotian reconnaissance teams into Communist China.

The teams are now back at their staging area-airstrip of Nam Lieu (sometimes called Nam Yu, located inside Laos 15 minutes flying time---by Air America---from the Laotian opium center of Houei Sai) resting from their usual chores of tapping Chinese telegraph lines, observing construction activities and monitoring agricultural production levels and road truck traffic.

Next: The C.I.A. in Asia (II)---"The World's Biggest Spy Budget."

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE: Most American reports on Indonesia call attention to the "startling growth" of Japanese influence on that Southeast Asian country's economy.

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